

Metal's celebrated frontman embarks on an all-encompassing adventure

AFTER SPLITTING FROM Iron Maiden in 1993, Bruce's solo career ascended to a stunning creative apex with 1998's The Chemical Wedding, a heavyweight William Blake concept opus providing sharp relief against the contemporaneous Maiden disc, low-point Virtual XI. Hatchets have long since been buried, and Bruce's creative focus has remained Maiden-centred for nearly

THE MANDRAKE PROJECT FLIES BY, BUT STILL FEELS LIKE AN EPIC JOURNEY

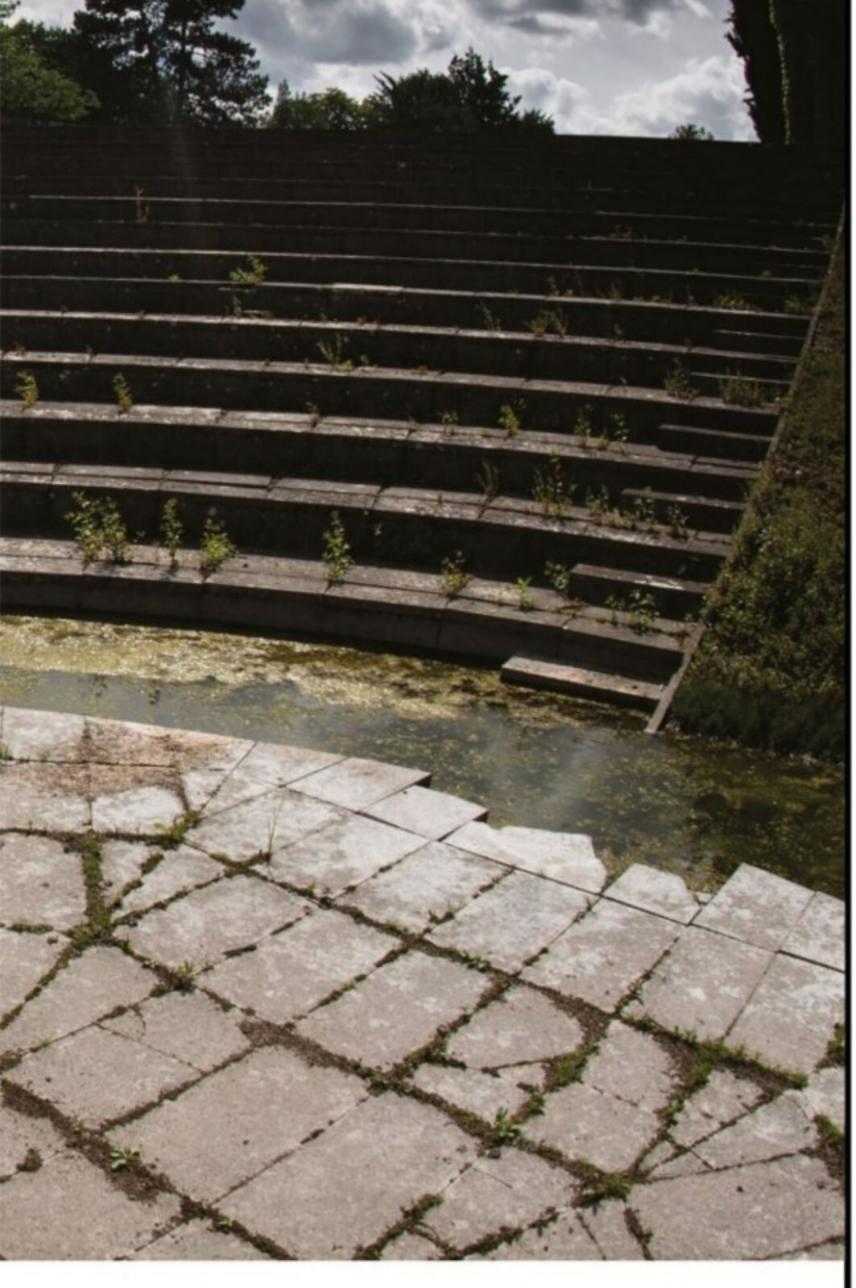
20 years, assimilating his eccentric force of personality into a six-way endeavour. Unloosed again at last from these democratic checks and balances, Bruce's extraordinary voice - in every sense: larynx, character and attitude - resounds from guitarist Roy Z's spectacularly thick, fervid production. The singer has rarely sounded more assertive, upfront and in your face, while his

commitments to narrative storytelling and wide-open imagination have seldom reached higher, urging his vocals to new levels of expressive emotion and dramatic control.

As with The Chemical Wedding, there is a powerful

unifying sweep to the album, even if the concepts can feel quite cryptic and abstruse, with meanings and nuances that need to be unlocked like new levels of a game quest. Videogames, rather than movies, are a plausible pointer to the album's soundtracklike impulses. Atmospheric noises and symphonic flourishes burst and brood with dark, grainy intensity, making a virtue of their synthetic origins. Crucially, these densely layered, orchestrated soundscapes and sophisticated arrangements are frequently counterpointed against direct, stripped-back volleys of classic metal heroism. Killer tunes like Many Doors To Hell, goth-tinged headbanger Resurrection Men and the nonballadic half of Shadow Of The Gods impel delirious raised fists with their spunky

#### **ALBUM REVIEWS**



NWOBHM riffing and meaty, screamalong choruses.

Bruce's best solo work has always skewed towards heftier tones. Pants were soiled in '98 by King In Crimson's Obituary-heavy guitar sound, and The Mandrake Project rapidly pulls its weight, opening advance cut Afterglow Of Ragnarok getting underway with a marauding riff that's half Swedish true metal sword-wavers Grand Magus, half UK death metal warhorses Bolt Thrower. One fascinating, unprecedented surprise is the remake of Iron Maiden's If Eternity Should Fail, here ominously retitled Eternity Has Failed. Shorter, slower, heavier and darker than the song we've known and loved for nine years, this is technically its original incarnation, a measure of how long this LP has taken to come together. Either way, it's a great song, arguably besting the original by substituting

a real flute for Maiden's synthesised trumpet intro.

The Mandrake Project demands and rewards total absorption into its kaleidoscopic sound picture. Multiple strands of Bruce's solo career are drawn together throughout. There's the accessible hard rock of 1990's Tattooed Millionaire, the ambitious versatility of 1994's Balls To Picasso, the snappy cosmic prog of 1996's Skunkworks - as well as the profound, elegant metal classicism that is the man's primary skillset - with lyrical references to old songs adding to the cohesive, celebratory vibe. Technically, it's an hour long, but The Mandrake Project is so filled with ideas it seems to fly by in no time, yet still feels like an epic journey.

FOR FANS OF: Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, Black Sabbath

CHRIS CHANTLER



#### **ALFAHANNE** Vår Tid År Nu DARK ESSENCE

Swedish black'n'rollers in need of more bark with their bite

Songs about death, flames and wolves. Chums with musicians you could charitably label 'naughty'. Naming your band 'alpha male'. Ja, this is Swedish black metal. Alfahanne's fifth album is their most traditionally BM yet, drier than a sand-rat's sphincter, festooned with trve kvlt tremolo and reverb - but is there much else? There's plenty, but it lacks WOOF. Alfa Omega's Swedish-asa-semla punk kneecaps itself with the cheapest horns this side of the Christmas sales, while the slidy guitar through Eremiten and Wolfman is more SpongeBob SquarePants than Wayfarer. When Alfahanne balance crusty aggression, bleakness and rock'n'roll catchiness perfectly, you get 9:e Cirkein. Kvelertak-ish gang vocals and groove abound. Shame the rest is a bit Kampfar-lite.

FOR FANS OF: Kampfar, Wormwood, Kvelertak ALEC CHILLINGWORTH



#### BARATRO The Sweet Smell Of Unrest IMPROVED SEQUENCE

Ex-Unsane guitarist adds a touch of melody to the battery

While heavy metal withered on the vine in the alt rock 90s, the US noise-rock scene was pulverising ears coast to coast, with Unsane leading the feral pack. After leaving the band in 2017, Unsane

bassist Dave Curran moved to Italy, found a couple of soulmates in a Milan squat, and formed Baratro, who straddle the rocket engine roar of Curran's old band but hammer the relentless assault into something almost tuneful. Their debut album is a careening bulldozer of molasses-thick sludge and face-stabbing hardcore. From the subbasement rock'n'roll of Fighting The Parking Meter to the sickly lurch of Pope Of Dope, ... Unrest is as catchy as it is terrifying.

FOR FANS OF: Unsane, Melvins, Whores KEN McINTYRE



#### BARREN WOMB Chemical Tardigrade FUCKING NORTH POLE/ BLUES FOR THE RED SUN

Norwegian noise rock duo reassert their invincibility

Barren Womb's 2020 album, Lizard Lounge, deservedly caught the attention of a lot of people. A caustic mix of Scandi-rock swagger, wince-inducing sonic chaos and throbbing post-punk rhythms, it gave the pair a high bar to reach with its follow-up. Impressively, this fifth album does that with ease. The most noticeable reason is the production; Barren Womb sound bigger, fatter, heavier, wilder and even more unhinged this time around, but the songs are better, and the scope is broader too. For example, Bachelor Of Puppets manages to take Big Black, Bleachera Nirvana, Queens Of The Stone Age and The Bronx and turn them into one big hard-rock rager. A hugely exciting return.

FOR FANS OF: Shellac, Death From Above 1979, Lightning Bolt

STEPHEN HILL



## **AMARANTHE**

The Catalyst

Sweden's symphonic metal powerhouse shuffle the decks

YOU HAVE TO hand it to Amaranthe. When they debuted in 2009 as a threeheaded pop-metal singing machine, they were an acquired taste, but they've won a legion of fans by deftly sticking to a winning formula with enough reinvention to keep their



music fresh. 2020's Manifest pushed their boundaries towards a heavier, djentier sound, and on their seventh album Amaranthe have glided into yet another new guise that promises to be "more adventurous than ever".

However, where Manifest paid dividends with its thrilling bombast, The Catalyst is surprisingly restrained. Granted, there are moments when it showcases its dramatic edge with aplomb. Damnation Flame is one instance, drawing on harpsichord and orchestral flourishes for an exhilarating ride. Likewise, Breaking The Waves, an ethereal and undulating anthem supercharged by synth and classical motifs, is a superb demonstration of the band's capability to blend electronics and layered instrumentation with clean and harsh vocals. But rather than a continuous thread, the theatrical elements are sporadic, leaving some of the album to retreat into its comfort zone of Eurovision–friendly power metal.

Stylistics aside, the album's biggest talking point is its ability to deliver in the face of a major line-up change. Waving goodbye to their long-standing growler Henrik Englund Wilhelmsson – who we are assured left on amicable terms to focus on his family – Amaranthe welcome new harsh vocalist Mikael Sehlin to the fold, and his contribution is immediately felt. Storming in on the title track, Mikael's snarls, growls and fried vocals are a perfect match for Elize Ryd and Nils Molin's spotlight-stealing tones. The threesome work in harmony on the vocoder-driven Re Vision, while Mikael's serrated rap on the Rob Zombie-groove-ridden Ecstasy is the track's driving force, rounding off yet another Amaranthe album that feels fresh and energetic.

FOR FANS OF: Battle Beast, Deadlock, Nightwish
HOLLY WRIGHT



#### BEING AS AN OCEAN Death Can Wait

OUT OF LINE MUSIC

Post-hardcore aficionados wade into the shallow end

Six albums deep, Being As An Ocean have strayed from their gritty posthardcore roots. While the Californians' gutwrenching poetics remain, this authenticity is stifled beneath shallow pop-rock inflections. Death Can Wait airbrushes its agony rather than allowing the guttural torment to linger. The album has its moments. Gloom is a bittersweet tussle of soft vocals and sharp, spoken-word vitriol, but there's an undeniable commercially minded mood throughout, breaking the spell of tracks like Purest Love as its oozing, hypnotic pain is cut short with a glitzy chorus. Standout ... Gave It A Voice So That My Heart Could Speak, with its raw acoustics, serves as a reminder: sometimes less is more.

FOR FANS OF: Casey, Defeater, Capsize EMILY SWINGLE



## BIG SCENIC NOWHERE The Waydown

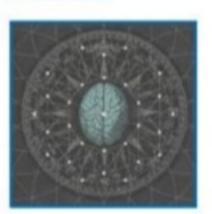
HEAVY PSYCH SOUNDS

Desert rock dune lords brandish all their hooks

Psych/stoner/space rock collective Big Scenic
Nowhere have been rising through the underground since emerging in 2019.
This third album should help continue their ascent, as it boasts some of their best songwriting, paring back their extended jam

sessions to focus more on 70s rock-flavoured hooks. Featuring members of Fu Manchu, Mos Generator and Yawning Man, the record is a powerful, sometimes playful listen. Bleed On is The Waydown's finest moment and a magnetic mix of honeyed vocals and heavy riffs, but their fun and irresistible cover of Sara Smile by soft rockers Hall & Oates is a close second, and is destined to become a live favourite.

FOR FANS OF: Fu Manchu, Brant Bjork, Earthless EDWIN MCFEE



#### BIPOLAR ARCHITECTURE Metaphysicize

*Metaphysicize* Pelagic

German/Turkish death metallers find their post-metal calling

Featuring two members of Turkey's brutal death metallers Heretic Soul, Bipolar Architecture have made the unlikely pivot to atmospheric post-metal - albeit with an integration of tech metal riffing that's both their distinction and, at times, a hindrance. The title track's harmonised lead melodies and piercing blasts open the album with grace, but it's curious to hear the delicate crescendos of Kayai and Immor(t)al pay off with chugging drops that could have come from the post-Sempiternal rush a decade ago. The production is a little cold and distant, and, compounded by monotonous vocals, the formulaic nature of these songs is noticeable. At their best, though, they're capable of a mountainous beauty, and deceptively difficult to label.

FOR FANS OF: The Ocean, Celeste, Russian Circles PERRAN HEYLES

### SMALL MERCIES

Where EP is short for 'Epic Potential'



#### **DRIPPING DECAY**

Ripping Remains SATANIK ROYALTY

Ragged, hostile and reeking of putrifying flesh, DD perform six new autopsies on this unexpected follow-up to last year's Festering Grotesqueries. OSDM meets dirty grind, and nobody leaves with all their teeth.

DOM LAWSON



#### LEVELS Pulse

SHARPTONE
Following a run of singles that show off every facet of their sound, Levels have taken a more euphoric direction. This EP mashes together everything from metalcore and pop, to

drum'n'bass and trance.

DANNII LEIVERS



## WIZARD DEATH I Am The Night SELF-RELEASED

A father/son duo who bonded over 3 Inches Of Blood, Wizard Death have a more wholesome backstory than most trad metal marauders, augmented by banshee wails from Witch Mountain's Kayla Dixon.

CHRIS CHANTLER



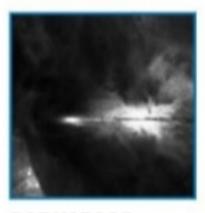
BLOOM
Maybe In Another Life
PURE NOISE

Australian metalcore debutants stick to the script

Bloom add weight to the notion that Australian metal bands can do no wrong. On their debut album, catchy, punching riffs accompany beautiful melodic vocal sections and aggressive screams that leave a lasting impression. The title track is infectious with strong hooks and mean vocals, while Siren Song and Laughing Stock lean towards more traditional hardcore elements of frenetic drumming and aggressive guitars designed to incite moshpits. The simplicity of each song's composition is what makes this work so well; Bloom don't beat around the bush, and their confident execution will see them added to your must-listen bands of 2024.

FOR FANS OF: Make Them Suffer, Counterparts, Polaris

CHERI FAULKNER



DARKSPACE
Dark Space -II
SEASON OF MIST

Switzerland's cosmic black metal overlords revisit the void

It's been almost a decade since the release of Darkspace's last ambitious broadcast from the celestial abyss. Since then, mainstays Wroth and Zhaaral have parted company with founding member Zorgh, recruiting Yhs along the way, but little else seems to have changed. These Swiss

sentinels continue to chart their own resolutely enigmatic path through negative space, accompanied by a soundtrack of incessant guitar chugs and martial industrialised rhythms. Meanwhile, electronic detritus and slithers of disembodied speech are sporadically jettisoned in Burroughs-ian jumbles of syntax error. Unlike the majority of black metal cosmonauts whose radiant atmospheres offer a technicolour two-step around the stars, Darkspace plunge ever deeper into an all-nullifying interstellar emptiness, their labyrinthine transmissions uniformly cold, viscous, clinical and cruel.

FOR FANS OF: Paysage d'Hiver, Battle Dagorath, Arkhtinn

SPENCER GRADY



# ENTERPRISE EARTH Death: An Anthology MNRK HEAVY

Reconstructed deathcore heavies get their thrills at the threshold

When vocalist Dan Watson left Enterprise Earth mere months after the release of 2022's The Chosen, so did the Spokane deathcore mob's last founding member. Undeterred, and with touring singer Travis Worland promoted to permanent duties, the quartet forged ahead and produced this fifth, mortality-minded record. It's still chock-full of the riffs, breakdowns and throat-wrenching gutturals they're well known for, but there are some twists, like the acoustic guitars that bookend Casket Of Rust and the opening to Blood And Teeth, which is entirely piano and clean vocals. Death... also has a handful of guest appearances,

including Trivium's Matt Heafy, who shows up on the crushing closing track Curse Of Flesh. A new chapter has begun for Enterprise Earth, and it's started pretty well.

FOR FANS OF: Fit For An Autopsy, Shadow Of Intent, Suffocation

**ELLIOT LEAVER** 



# FAR BEYOND The End Of My Road PROSTHETIC

Extreme symphonic metaller offers a familiar, bombastic manifesto

It's incredibly difficult to make a 10-minute song feel exciting for its entire runtime. On this debut album, German solo project Far Beyond do it four times. The ironically named The End Of My Road is built with grand, symphonic compositions separated by brief instrumental segues and, over 43 minutes, the formula could easily have grown stale. However, vocalist and multiinstrumentalist Eugen Dodenhoeft effectively mines from power, symphonic, black and death metal to make each suite as overblown as humanly possible. The unwavering bombast, epitomised during Tempus Fugit's pseudo-medieval singalongs and A Symphony Of Light's heroic soloing, keeps everything exhilarating, even if the individual ingredients are all familiar to genre fans. In an orchestral and extreme-sounding landscape populated by veterans like Septicflesh, Far Beyond isn't distinct yet, but the unapologetic excess declares Eugen's got potential to burn.

FOR FANS OF: Septicflesh, An Abstract Illusion, Ne Obliviscaris

**MATT MILLS** 



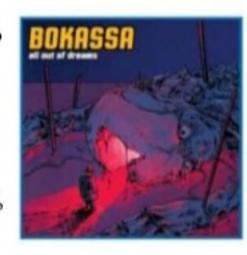
### BOKASSA All Out Of Dreams

INDIE RECORDINGS

Lars Ulrich's favourite Nordic punks dial up the metal

#### OVER RECENT YEARS,

Bokassa have been handpicked to support Judas
Priest, Mastodon and
Metallica – with Lars Ulrich
having declared them his
favourite new band. Some
of this must have rubbed off,
as All Out Of Dreams is the
band's most compact and



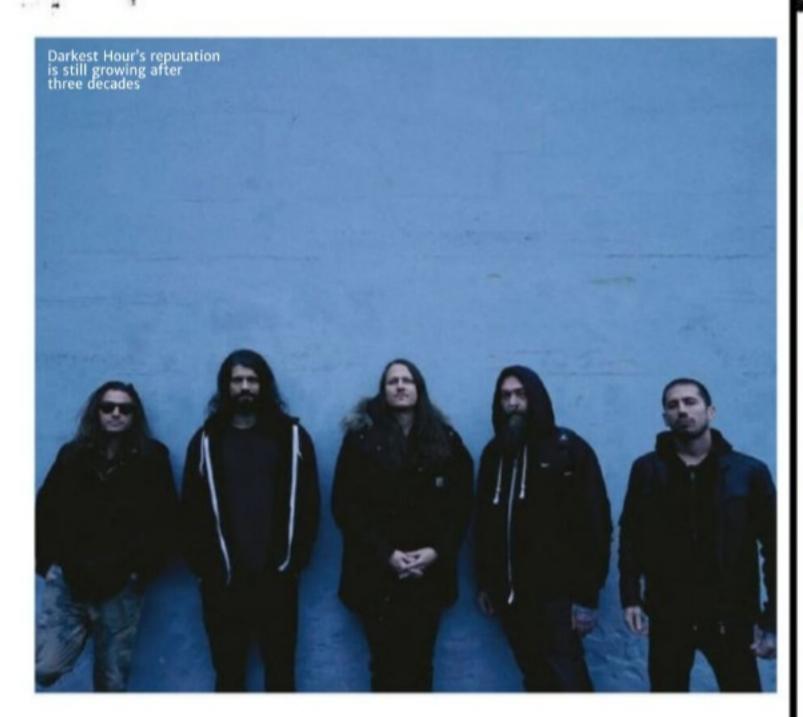
metallic album to date. There are sharp metal riffs aplenty lurking in the flotsam, but there's still a punk rock heart beating beneath it all, wrapped in dense layers of stoner fuzz, a neat line in poppy hooks and frequent curveballs.

The common thread tying all these elements together is a songwriting skill that just keeps getting better. If 2021's splendidly titled *Molotov Rocktail* was a burst of flavours thrown together with uncontrolled enthusiasm, *All Out Of Dreams* is a more considered whole put together by a seasoned mixologist. There's no overarching theme beyond a certain bleakness to the lyrics, but there's more of a flow to the songs.

The Ending Starts Today kicks things off in a cascade of drums and melodic punk guitars before Sick Of It All veteran Lou Koller steps aboard for the hugely hooky holler-along of Garden Of Heathen. As well as boasting the joint best title (alongside Bradford Death Squadron), Straight Edgelord brings in the heavy metallic riffing and casually drops in a soul gospel clap-along section. Let's Storm The Capitol throws in catchy 'Woah-oh' hooks, glammy refrains and cowbells, all while taking aim at 'useful idiots' and the demagogues who exploit them. It's also the best song the band have ever written, according to drummer Olav Dowkes' mum.

For such a fun-sounding album, the themes revolve around resignation and despair – without the glimmer of optimism bands outside the doom scene customarily include. There's enough joy in the music to shine through, though, and All Out Of Dreams provides a hugely enjoyable rush.

FOR FANS OF: Turbonegro, Clutch, The Lawrence Arms



## DARKEST HOUR

### Perpetual | Terminal

MNRK HEAVY

Metallic hardcore's abiding underdogs keep their fires burning

darkest hour

PERPETUAL | TERMINAL

NEXT YEAR WILL mark a full three decades as an active band for Washington DC's cult metallic hardcore heroes Darkest Hour. During that time, they have created a pretty compelling

argument for being the most underrated and under-appreciated band from that early 2000s, Killswitch Engage-led, metalcore boom. We're now 10 albums in and the quintet are still full of the pace, ingenuity and spite that has made each of their albums such a pleasure.

Save for the excellent, acoustic opening to the Blind Melon-esque Mausoleum, there's really nothing new or explorative on Perpetual | Terminal. But when you are as good at filtering classic thrash and melodic death metal through a punk rock framework as this band are, it doesn't matter one jot. The two-stepping rhythms and warp-speed riffing that open Societal Bile and Love Is Fear or the Integrity-meets-At The Gates melodic brutality of New Utopian Dream might seem like easy tropes to rely on, but in the hands of Darkest Hour they sound absolutely box-fresh and essential.

Darkest Hour have never truly received the accolades their work deserves, and there's clearly still a level of hunger and desire to prove themselves that some of their more commercially lauded peers

> have long since lost. Credit for that should go, in particular, to the two remaining original members - vocalist John Henry sounds vicious and urgent throughout, and guitarist Mike Schleibaum has once again packed an entire career's worth of great riffs and leads into a single album. That's not

to downplay the contribution of the rest of the band; seldom have a collective of this vintage sounded as tight and in sync as DA do on the pulverising The Nihilist Undone, or on the chaotic old-school hardcore and gang vocal-led My Only Regret. Seven years since the equally excellent Godless Prophets & the Migrant Flora, Darkest Hour prove again why those in the know believe they are one of metal's greatest secrets.

FOR FANS OF: Unearth, God Forbid, Heaven Shall Burn STEPHEN HILL



**FARSOT** Life Promised Death PROPHECY PRODUCTIONS

Enigmatic Germans extend the black metal spectrum

Farsot's latest is a dense, grunge-tinged odyssey worthy of the Germans' genre-melting renown. Nausea's labyrinthine, visceral mix of despair and aggression sets a precedent for the album's deep dive into thematic darkness. Farsot's cryptic allure the band are identified as numeric pseudonyms shimmers ineffably through these seven tracks, using black metal as a launchpad for more a nuanced exploration of styles such as post-metal, grunge and prog. The stylistic fusion invokes a thrilling sense of unpredictability. And when tracks like Buoyant Flames uncork the blastbeats, it's an exhilarating nod to Farsot's Norwegian influences. Lyrically compelling and sonically vast, Life ... is a transfixing voyage that boldly reaffirms this band's avant-garde legacy.

FOR FANS OF: A Forest Of Stars, Ultha, Almyrkvi JOE DALY



#### THE GEMS Phoenix NAPALM

Former Thundermother members kick out a new set of jams

In 2023 singer Guernica Mancini was fired from Thundermother and, in a show of solidarity, bassist Mona Lindgren and drummer Emlee Johansson quit, all three quickly forming The Gems and

releasing their debut a fierce and defiant 'fuck you' of razor-sharp rock'n' roll. There's no avoiding Thundermother's DNA on Phoenix, but it fizzes with confidence. Mona, who also plays guitar here, has a chance to truly show off her six-string skills. From Guernica's rich warbling on rabble-rouser Queens to Like A Phoenix's FM-friendly riffage and P.S.Y.C.H.O's blistering attack, The Gems are intent on keeping the good times rolling.

FOR FANS OF: The Pretty Reckless, Thundermother, H.E.A.T

HOLLY WRIGHT



**GUHTS** Regeneration **NEW HEAVY SOUNDS** 

Eclectic Brooklynites take a scenic tour through the underworld

Going on name alone, you might expect Guhts to peddle some form of knuckle-dragging sludge, but the reality is very different. Regeneration might be slow and immeasurably dense, but the glacial shift of the riffs serve as a backdrop. Starkweather-esque melodies and shimmering, dissonant prettiness are pushed to the fore, while vocalist Amber Gardner puts in a startlingly diverse performance, cooing, crooning and howling as though tumbling headfirst toward the gates of Hell. Piano, smudges of electronica and tremolopicked moments that blur the lines between postrock and black metal all play their part, and Regeneration benefits mightily from such a colourful palette.

FOR FANS OF: Isis, King Woman, Deftones **ALEX DELLER** 



#### INFECTED RAIN Time NAPALM

Moldova's tech-groove metallers search for a nu sound

Despite their longerrunning discography, Moldova's Infected Rain have never been able to shake off comparisons to Ukrainian trailblazers Jinjer. Both share a label and a progressive, grooveheavy sound with roots in technical metalcore, yet IR have struggled to match the same critical acclaim as their Eastern European scenemates. It's perhaps for that reason that this sixth album takes them in new directions. Nu metal provides the swaggering undercurrent of opener Because I Let You, a stylistic avenue that later makes the gothic Lighthouse sound like Evanescence. Elsewhere, the band have upped the atmospherics with positive results, the ethereal piano and synths on Dying Light and Vivarium providing a dynamic contrast to the metallic fury of Enmity. Time should finally see Infected Rain step out of the shadows.

FOR FANS OF: Jinjer, Spiritbox, Make Them Suffer

DANNII LEIVERS



## ISLAND APES Island Apes GOD UNKNOWN

Mind-expanding East Midlands negativity with added riffs

Oozing real-world anxiety from every pore, Island Apes are far from the sun-kissed chimps their

name suggests. A shadowy quartet from the East Midlands, they appear to have channelled all their thwarted ambitions and pernicious neuroses into a scattershot musical nightmare. With former members of Fudge Tunnel and Bivouac in their ranks, a hefty dose of barbarous noise rock is only to be expected, and the noir-ish, fidgety likes of Stitt and Carrie Grambo are rowdy enough. But Island Apes are restless souls, and at their most effective when wilfully disregarding standard procedure. Thus, Oceans Of Dub is a claustrophobic rush of swampy, subsonic sludge, RDEH4 and Leah are lolloping krautrock jams with psych trimmings, and KOB takes the Stooges into outer space, pumps them full of drugs and leaves them gently floating towards a black hole.

FOR FANS OF: The Heads, The Shits, Chat Pile DOM LAWSON



#### METH. Shame PROSTHETIC

Experimental noise-rockers search for a spark in the dark

When an album gives you an immediate sense of its real-life source material, you know it's doing exactly what it set out to do. Such is the case here with these Illinois math/noise experimentalists' second album, which drips with despair and malcontent as vocalist Seb Alvarez recounts his struggles with undiagnosed bipolar disorder and unchecked alcoholism. It's all communicated via a relentless wall of noise, driven by soul-shredding vocals and nerve-jangling drums. If 2019's Mother Of

Red Light was a challenging listen, Shame sees meth. restart the game on the highest difficulty setting. This album is as bleak and uncomfortable as they come; every ounce of Seb's mental pain and physical suffering is on full display and results in meth.'s most visceral recording to date.

FOR FANS OF: Body Void, Full Of Hell, Leeched JACK TERRY



#### MORBID SAINT Swallowed By Hell HIGH ROLLER

Ruthless, ripping thrash from the Wisconsin battlegrounds

Best known for their furious and chaotic 1990 debut Spectrum Of Death, Morbid Saint have been enjoying a fruitful second wind since reconvening in 2010. Their last album, 2015's Destruction System, was a merciless, destructive comeback that noisily reaffirmed the Wisconsin quintet's thrash credentials, post-hiatus. Pleasingly, another nine-year gap has done nothing to diminish their attack. Armed with the heaviest production of their career, but still rooted in rawness and bloody squalor, Swallowed By Hell is a dirty, old-school thrash juggernaut that has no brakes and even fewer fucks to give. At times evil and brutish enough to cross over into death metal territory, songs like Burn Pit and Fuck Them All casually shatter speed limits and will not rest until every neck in the room is destroyed. Paul Baloff would definitely have approved. Morbid Saint will (still) fuck you up.

FOR FANS OF: Sadus, Razor, Sodom DOM LAWSON



### **JOB FOR A COWBOY**

Moon Healer Metal Blade

Tech-death titans make a cosmic comeback

#### ABSENCE REALLY

CAN make the heart grow fonder. Job For A Cowboy disappeared from view a decade or so ago, having never quite shrugged off their reputation as the snotty deathcore band that conquered the world via rarely missed social media



platform MySpace. Discerning folk knew the truth, of course. Their debut EP *Doom* aside, the Arizona crew's catalogue is full of inventive and idiosyncratic death metal records that all deserved more credit than they received at the time. In particular, 2014's *Sun Eater* was a towering masterpiece that has since become a revered benchmark for modern, technical and progressive DM. We don't know what we've got until it's gone, as they say.

This cowboy was, of course, always destined to ride again. Finally capitulating to the clamour of a newly expanded fanbase after a decade of silence, frontman Jonny Davy and his comrades are clearly aware that their stock has risen considerably since they powered down. Moon Healer is the perfect sequel to Sun Eater: a convincing next step that reasserts JFAC's uniqueness, while hurling down a rusty gauntlet to the many bands that rode in on their coat-tails in the mid-oos.

Like its predecessor, this is a concept album, and its preoccupations are of a palpably existential and lysergic hue, which matches the relentlessly inventive and disorientating song structures perfectly. More importantly, JFAC have pushed the mutant death trips of Sun Eater even further into an unknowable cosmos. From punishing opener Beyond The Chemical Doorway to the excruciating, Lovecraftian dread-bang ritual of The Forever Rot, this is highly evolved, ferociously intelligent brutality, with an eccentric streak a mile wide and absolutely no fucking filler.

An uncompromising but joyful return, Moon Healer is the sound of a truly great band becoming even greater. We're lucky to have them back.

FOR FANS OF: Cattle Decapitation, Rivers Of Nihil, Fallujah





### IHSAHN

lhsahn

CANDLELIGHT / MNEMOSYNE PRODUCTIONS

Orchestral manoeuvres from black metal's brightest maverick

#### WHEN IHSAHN RELEASED his lavish,

shelf-threatening box set, The Hyperborean Collection, in 2021, it was a very clear and purposeful clearing of the decks. From Emperor's four classic albums to solo triumphs like After and Amr, the Norwegian has achieved



more than most and could easily have slacked off for a bit, satisfied with a job well done. Instead, he's made the most ambitious and extravagant album of his career.

A concept piece devoted to some hazily defined hero's epic journey, Ihsahn is a game of two distinct halves. The first presents an astonishing splurge of new songs: still firmly within the Norwegian's self-created wheelhouse of artful, restless black metal, but with full and florid orchestral elements throughout. Ihsahn has been mixing strings with metallic bombast for more than 30 years, but never with quite this much unabashed ingenuity and flair. Here, metal band and orchestra are woven seamlessly together, each surge of violins or brass adding colour, definition and extra muscle to these intricate songs' wayward momentum.

And what songs they are. The Promethean Spark and Pilgrimage To Oblivion are as vicious and volatile as anything in Ihsahn's past, but with more twists, turns and cinematic sumptuousness than ever before; Twice Born is three-and-a-half minutes of evolved black metal prog perfection; Hubris And Blue Devils is a crazed riot of ideas, from jagged, Twilight Zone-style guitar motifs and blistering blastbeats to unsettling oases of warped circus music. Closing epic At The Heart Of All Things Broken is staggeringly beautiful and crushing in equal measure, and may be the finest thing Ihsahn has ever written.

The album's second half comprises the same 11 songs, arranged solely for the orchestra, and with elegantly immersive results. In its opulent entirety, Ihsahn represents a proud and confident raising of the stakes for one of metal's greatest visionaries.

FOR FANS OF: Emperor, Arcturus, Wilderun DOM LAWSON



#### NAKE Nake SELF-RELEASED

Prog and sci-fi excursions from Danish instru-metal debutants

This Danish instrumental quartet's debut takes inspiration from John Carpenter and Morricone film scores as much as it does from the likes of Night Verses and Pelican. Nake also ventures into prog territory, with retro space-age synths liberally sprinkled throughout. This will either be music to your ears or a sadistic form of audio torture, but props to Nake for fully embracing and realising a potentially polarising sound on their first try. Weaver's rhythmic patterns and tribal drums evoke Tool perhaps a tad too closely, but the quartet are capable of surprising turns as well, such as the rip-roaring Malmsteenesque guitar solo nestled in the middle of opening track Offering.

FOR FANS OF: Between The Buried And Me, John Carpenter, Chimp Spanner

REMFRY DEDMAN



#### **NIGHT FEVER** Dead End

Danish high-energy hardcore punks know how to do it

These hardcore punks are back, with lashings of raucous energy and deliciously old-school fretwork. The seriously sticky Lone Wolf is a perfect example of their full-pelt power and pace, and the rest of the songwriting here is just as strong. Forged for

fuelling moshpits, they're fast and furious without ever losing sight of the hooks and melodies needed along the way. Dynamic frontman Salomon Segers' high, urgent vocal style is still polarising but also offers more variety this time around, as seen with the punchier delivery in Reunited and Up The Wall. This is a gem.

FOR FANS OF: Misfits, Tyrant, Municipal Waste NIK YOUNG



#### **PERSEFONE** Lingua Ignota: Part I NAPALM

Andorran prog metal underdogs make their bid for stardom

Despite being endorsed by Cynic leader Paul Masvidal and inking a deal with Napalm Records, Persefone still remain massively underrated. The Andorran extreme/progressive metal unit have been dealing in uber-technical melodicism for 20 years now - and here they scream for broader recognition. Openers Sounds And Vessels and One Word counterbalance the band's complexities with an upfront, singable hook. The Equable emphasises the near-operatic pipes of new singer Daniel Rodríguez Flys, and Lingua Ignota crams itself with full-throttle Lamb Of God-style riffing. Although these 26 minutes don't do anything that peers from Ne Obliviscaris to Allegaeon haven't already attempted, the immediacy and infectiousness should help push Persefone to new heights.

FOR FANS OF: Allegaeon, Black Crown Initiate, Rivers Of Nihil

MATT MILLS

### WORLD SERVICE

Heavy metal uprisings from around the globe



#### LITOSTH Cesariana PERSONAL

Unusually for a Brazilian band, Litosth eschew filth in favour of vastness and splendour. Their fourth LP offers classy, wall-of-sound blackened DM: symphonic in scope and executed with perfectionist zeal.

DOM LAWSON



#### **MYRATH** Karma **EARMUSIC**

These Tunisians' sixth LP is their most effective fusion so far of Eastern mysticism and Western metal. Though unapologetically melodic, its muso-friendly thrust and dynamics will render Dream Theater fans agog.

DAVE LING



#### **PAINT THE SKY RED** Tamat SELF-RELEASED

This Malaysian post-rock collective bow out with a series of gorgeously melodic soundscapes that build and fade expertly. Filled with sublime nuance and subtleties, Tamat rewards repeat listens.

STEPHEN HILL



## PROFILER A Digital Nowhere SHARPTONE

Bristolian debutants set out to recreate the nu metal dream

Profiler's debut album comes out of the gate strong as its fierce opener, All In Forever, contains clear influences of Limp Bizkit and Deftones. This Bristolian trio are joining the nu metal revival, but injecting it with elements of shoegaze and grunge. Standout tracks Artifice, Zero, Animo and To Utopia all boast an enjoyable mix of aggressive riffs, swirling melodies, screams, and nostalgic rap. Unfortunately, some other tracks on here, such as Consumed and Delay, step away from the delicate balance of the furious and the ethereal nailed so brilliantly by bands like Linkin Park and Loathe, as what start out as potentially powerful dreamy contrasts have a habit of losing momentum.

### FOR FANS OF: Linkin Park, Deftones, Incubus



#### ROMUVOS Spirits HAMMERHEART

Lithuania's pagan folk metallers straddle the ages on album four

If you've had your interest piqued by the tribalistic, earthy sounds of Heilung and Wardruna, but wished they incorporated electric elements, then this fourth record by Lithuanians Romuvos will answer all your prayers. Beginning as a one-man project in 2014,

they've since expanded to a five-piece, combining those steady, ritual-styled drums and chanting vocals which flit between English, their native tongue and old Prussian – with folk metal riffs and melodies. The rhythmic guitar chugs and deep, bass voices on Sun And The Morning Star evoke notions of an East European answer to The Hu, while the more atmospheric notes of Become As One are a gorgeous marriage of contemporary and traditional instruments. Romuvos have leaned more on their more pagan and acoustic influences here than on previous releases, and it's paid off well.

FOR FANS OF: Wardruna, Heilung, The Hu ELLIOT LEAVER



## ROSCIAN The First Disgrace TREPANATION RECORDINGS

Grave Lines and Torpor members take an industrial left turn

Those familiar with the UK metal scene's bristly, scab-encrusted underbelly may well have encountered the duo behind Roscian in some form or other perhaps via Dead Existence, Torpor or Grave Lines. While undeniably heavy, this new project is an entirely different beast, with Jake Harding and Simon Mason lacing the album's dense doom and gloom with electronic elements and dour, dolorous melody. The not-so-quick one-two of To End, To Begin and What Cannot Be Soothed suggests a fondness for Justin Broadrick's work, touching base with Godflesh and Jesu, but also Final and Techno Animal. As the album progresses, the pair blend synth-pop with industrial brutality and

pepper proceedings with brief moments of bleakly tuneful ambience. Boasting talent and ideas aplenty, The First Disgrace is a strong start indeed – here's hoping many more

FOR FANS OF: Jesu, Remote Viewing, Uniform

disgraces are to follow.

ALEX DELLER



#### SGÀILE Traverse The Bealach AVANTGARDE MUSIC

Epic, apocalyptic laments from across the Scottish Highlands

Sgàile's heartfelt catharsis

is the work of Tony Dunn, a Scottish multiinstrumentalist and bassist/backing vocalist for folk/black metal troupe Cnoc An Tursa, who's translated his love for long-distance walking in the majesty of his native Highlands into a progressive metal odyssey. 2021's undercelebrated debut album, Ideals & Morality, laid the foundations for Traverse The Bealach's post-apocalyptic concept. Here, Tony's clean, earnest and multi-layered vocals come to the fore to soaring effect. As heard in lead single Lamentations By The Lochan, black metal remains a strong element within these predominantly mellifluous environs. Long tracks frequently build to moments of pure exhilaration, as on the pealing solo of The Ptarmigans Cry and the explosive release of scattershot drums and riffs on Silence. Authentic and intelligent, Traverse The Bealach is an emotionally epic trek worth putting in the miles for.

FOR FANS OF: Ihsahn, Devin Townsend, Opeth TOM O'BOYLE



## THE OBSESSED

Gilded Sorrow RIPPLE MUSIC

Maryland's doom legends expand their reach

#### SEVEN YEARS ON from

their last volley of new material, The Obsessed's latest outing marks a significant leap forward for both the band and their founder, Scott 'Wino' Weinrich, who helped to pioneer the doom and sludge movements of the 90s. The



band have long transcended their mid-70s punk roots, surviving break-ups, hiatuses and reunions to emerge as a steady, if sporadic, force in doom. For Wino (Saint Vitus, Spirit Caravan, Shrinebuilder), this is testament to his daring artistic vision and a dramatic departure from the raw essence of the band's early output.

Gilded Sorrow navigates varying degrees of intensity, with each track showcasing a different aspect of the band's pedigree. Daughter Of An Echo delivers a surging, funk-laden groove that showcases the fretboard wizardry of new guitarist Jason Taylor. His ability to effortlessly mesh into Wino's punchy riffs highlights a nuanced evolution towards a more layered sound, echoed on Realize A Dream and Wellspring - Dark Sunshine.

The powerful, refined production allows the songs to breathe and expand, shedding the lo-fi aesthetic of their past work. This is particularly evident on *Lucky Free Nice Machine* and the mesmerising title track, a glacial powerhouse with smouldering leads and chilling, evocative atmospherics. Nonetheless, *Gilded Sorrow* won't disappoint the band's doomy denizens, packing several concussive, downtuned bangers infused with a sharp psychedelic edge, such as *Stoned Back To The Bomb Age* and *Yen Sleep*.

The Obsessed have erected a formidable addition to their legacy and to the wider heavy metal canon. This is an album that venerates the band's storied past while revitalising their creative vision – a characteristic that is emblematic of Wino's career. A must-listen for fans of the genre and a compelling entry point for newer voyagers into the world of doom.

FOR FANS OF: Clutch, Black Label Society, Down



## STATIC-X

### Project: Regeneration Vol. 2

OTSEGO ENTERTAINMENT GROUP

Resurrected industrial metallers keep their batteries charged

devite

#### CONSIDERING MOST PEOPLE

would have fully expected Static-X to have ceased in the aftermath of iconic frontman Wayne Static's passing in 2014, the current iteration of the band

is a surprisingly enjoyable one. Once you got past the somewhat troubling image of Wayne's replacement Xero being positioned as a zombified version of his predecessor, the shows the band played in tribute to him were a great reminder of how many fun songs they had.

Maybe even more impressive was the fact that when Project: Regeneration Vol. 1 was released in 2020, they still sounded worthy of the Static-X name, even if it wasn't quite up to the standard of the band's excellent first pair of millennium-straddling albums, Wisconsin Death Trip and Machine.

So no one really should be too shocked that *Project: Regeneration Vol.* 2 is a perfectly serviceable, and often very enjoyable, Static-X album. It seems impossible to imagine that fans of the band won't be delighted to hear the thumping electronic grooves, juddering riffs and manic, rasping vocal

stylings of their patented death disco all present and correct on tracks like Zombie or Take Control. Both are hugely catchy and are guaranteed to get heads banging and hips swinging, despite

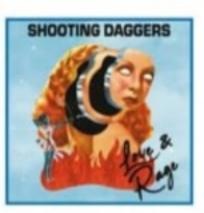
being fairly rudimentary by 2024 standards.

Admittedly, there isn't much in the way of growth, breadth or dynamism here, with every song being some kind of attempt at industrial rock floor filler. Fourteen tracks of that (including bonus tracks), though, does

start to drag a bit, and a bemusing, clunky cover of Nine Inch Nails' Terrible Lie shows that Static-X fall short of being considered an A-list band from this genre.

These are just minor quibbles, though. Considering how many people scoffed at the very idea of Static-X without their most recognisable member when this reunion was announced, this line-up continues to prove its worth.

FOR FANS OF: Pitchshifter, 3Teeth, Powerman 5000 STEPHEN HILL



## **SHOOTING DAGGERS** *Love & Rage*

NEW HEAVY SOUNDS

UK queercore trio unleash the true spirit of punk rock

The extent to which the term 'punk rock' is thrown around far too loosely and liberally these days is always brought into sharp focus when a band who exhibit all its best and most essential elements turn up. This London-based, multicultural, queercore trio's debut album is a superbly exciting romp through all the best bits of DC hardcore, the earliest days of CBGB's and the dirtiest, grimiest era of Seattle grunge. It's all delivered with an uncontrollable, utterly uncompromising vitality all too rare in the more sanitised world of modern punk rock. In a mere nine songs and 21 minutes, Shooting Daggers may well have already made 2024's finest punk album.

FOR FANS OF: X-Ray Spex, Veruca Salt, Bad Brains STEPHEN HILL



#### SLOPE Freak Dreams CENTURY MEDIA

Germany's unruly funk/punk metallers turn up the heat

Before the Red Hot Chili
Peppers became barechested denizens of
daytime radio, they
specialised in a chaotic
splurge of punk, funk and
psychedelic weirdness that
was bold, brash and out of
control. Slope take us back
to those freaky styley days
and, if half of it didn't feel

like a straight rehash,
Freak Dreams would be
magnificent. When they
bring in a selection of
heavier punk metal riffs
on the likes of Nosedive
and Ain't Easy, they end up
sounding like the Beastie
Boys instead. There's a lot
of reckless energy, though,
and the Germans actually
form the chaos into better
songs than the Chilis did
back in the day, making
this fun but inessential.

FOR FANS OF: Red Hot Chili Peppers, Beastie Boys, Turnstile

#### PAUL TRAVERS



## EINAR SOLBERG The Congregation Acoustic INSIDE OUT

Leprous leader strips down a prog metal masterpiece

By singer/keyboardist Einar Solberg's own admission, The Congregation is one of the worst albums to do a stripped-down reinterpretation of. Not only is Leprous' fourth album hailed by many as a masterpiece, so much of its excellence comes from the interplay between guitars, keys and electronica. Naturally, in performing for a livestream alone with just a piano, Einar removes those textures from the music. Yet, the frontman also reaffirms that good songs are good songs, no matter their form. Slave is still as anthemic as before, Einar howling the hook and pounding the keys, while his long, uninterrupted croons during The Price and The Flood equally entice and impress. On his own, the musician's made an emotional counterpoint to one of his band's greatest musical statements.

FOR FANS OF: Leprous, A.A. Williams, Ólafur Arnalds



### SOLBRUD VENDETTA

Exhilarating black metal from the dark corners of Copenhagen

The ambitious fourth fulllength from Denmark's Solbrud is testament to the band's innovative spirit. On this double album, the four musicians wrote their own distinct music/lyrics for one vinyl side each, though they all perform on all tracks. The result is a tapestry of black metal artistry, blending luminous melodies with blizzards of cold, scything riffs on Hvile and the consciousness-elevating, 15-minute epic Ædelråd, as well as punishing blastbeats on the Når Solen Brydes Del I - IIII suite. The production by Markus F. Larsen and Flemming Rasmussen, renowned for his work with Metallica, imbues the album with crystalline clarity, accentuating its thematic depth. IIII is more than a leap in Solbrud's journey, it's a bold affirmation of their eminent place in the black metal universe. A beacon of confidence, ambition and vision.

FOR FANS OF: Negură Bunget, The Ruins Of Beverast, Woods Of Ypres

JOE DALY



TVINNA Two - Wings Of Ember BY NORSE MUSIC

Eluveitie members merge the concepts of nature and nurture

Two - Wings Of Ember is the second of Tvinna's four-part conceptual series.

Conceived by spouses Laura (vocalist of pagan folk band Faun) and Rafael Fella (guitarist of folk metallers Eluveitie), Tvinna combine instrumentation and folklore old and new. Two is more experimental and incendiary than 2021's One In The Dark. That album explored the concept of birth; Two explores the early stages of life. The spirited chants of Louga, featuring Eluveitie vocalist Fabienne Erni, use the kindling of flame as a metaphor for raising children. Arma's rousing folk is blown out of the water with exuberant guitar psychedelia, before the punchy riffs and caustic electronica of the title track. Ritualistic in intent, with moments of psychrock abandon, Two subverts expectations with its vitality and will to experiment.

FOR FANS OF: Wardruna, Darkher, Myrkur TOM O'BOYLE



#### VANIR **Epitome** MIGHTY MUSIC

Danish melodic death history buffs tool up for battle

This Danish melodic death sextet bring some of the darkest chapters in the history of their homeland to life on their seventh album. Telling tales of bloody battlefields, meddling archbishops and kings and queens who'll stop at nothing to keep their thrones, the Middle Ages-set Epitome is suitably savage. Dispensing with their former folk metal elements, it's their loudest, most vicious effort yet. Twisting The Knife kicks it off with a roar. Recounting the Stockholm Bloodbath where nearly 100 people were executed, it features

riffs that could take your head off and catchy, cinematic synths. Blood Eagle boasts a battalion of soaring guitar solos, while Sorte Grethe is a dramatic, dynamic thriller about the reign of a Danish queen once nicknamed Black Greta. Exhilarating and enthralling, Epitome is royally good.

**FOR FANS OF: Amon** Amarth, Arch Enemy, Unleashed

EDWIN McFEE



#### **ZWIELICHT** The Aphotic Embrace

German black metallers draw out their sense of the dismal

Putting out your second album two decades into your career doesn't exactly suggest urgency. However, Zwielicht's ('Twilight') habit of lurking around in the underground has paid off here, bettering 2014's With Love From Sinister by seriously upping the sense of scale. Their Germanic style of black metal is capable of melody yet resolutely ugly, guiding the ear but not stepping back from the lightless abyss their moniker and album title promise. Stench Of Rotten Deities is a seriously strong track, the kind where you don't realise until late it's that been there for 10 minutes, and volatile riff changes as in Twilight Temple keep its suffocating force refreshed. Not every long song is as mesmerising, but the sensation of several tons of ocean pressure certainly never lifts. We'll see them in another decade for more bleakness, if we're all still alive.

FOR FANS OF: The Great Old Ones, Der Weg Einer Freiheit, Wiegedood

PERRAN HEYLES



## **CHELSEA WOLFE**

She Reaches Out To She Reaches Out To She **LOMA VISTA** 

Mercurial maestro of inner space undergoes another rebirth

FOLLOWING CHELSEA WOLFE'S career often

feels like one of those dreams where you're trailing some playful, puckish figure who's always rounding the next corner before you can fully glimpse them. A chameleonic, magpie-like approach has seen her mix



and match from a wide range of sounds, freely drawing from folk, goth, industrial and avant-metal while casting ideas nonchalantly aside only to reintegrate them at later dates.

It's fitting, then, for such a mercurial artist that She Reaches Out To She Reaches Out To She should deal with cycles of transformation and rebirth. Opener Whispers In The Echo Chamber has Chelsea proclaim 'I've shed a thousand skins since then,' and herein you'll find evidence of her past lives, from the industrial-leaning lurk of 2015's Abyss to more recent soundtrack work with composer (and Marilyn Manson collaborator) Tyler Bates.

This is a very different beast to the hushed, intimate Americana of 2019's Birth Of Violence. The icy electronica that quietly dappled that release has exploded into the foreground here, while unadulterated, rawk crunch and the influence of 90s industrial dancefloor fillers all swirl around Chelsea's distinctive voice.

At heart, though, She Reaches... is perhaps best viewed as a carefully layered art-pop record that has more in common with Tori Amos circa From The Choirgirl Hotel, David Bowie's Blackstar or that one video where Madonna transforms into a murder of crows. These latter influences give the album an air of familiarity, albeit filtered through the prism that has garnered Chelsea so many fans to date. From the playful plink and infectious pulse of Eyes Like Nightshade and the sultry creep of The Liminal through to the orchestral sweep of Unseen World, it's dense and engagingly dramatic: an enveloping paean to grabbing for one's own future with both hands and running headfirst to meet it.

FOR FANS OF: BiglBrave, Kate Bush, Kristin Hayter ALEX DELLER

